

THE FARMER'S REPORT

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RGW Candy Company in Atlanta, Ill., is slowing down production this summer because of the high cost of ingredients but will gear up for caramel apples this fall. (Photo courtesy of RGW Candy Company)

High cocoa prices challenge chocolatiers

By **PHYLLIS COULTER**
FarmWeek

Amy Wertheim never thought she would be affected by pirates and drought in Africa, but the third-generation, central Illinois chocolatier is experiencing just that. Luckily, her business also includes growing specialty crops and selling meals online, because the high prices of chocolate ingredients are tough to manage these days.

"Chocolate pricing has increased by more than 300% in the last three months," she said, attributing the hike mostly to droughts in Africa. The Ivory Coast and Ghana region, which is in extended drought, produces more than 70% of the world's cocoa, the owner of RGW Candy Co. in Atlanta noted.

Cocoa futures have more than doubled since the start of the year because of the drought in the main cocoa-producing areas. At the same time, ships traveling from Africa are being attacked and held for ransom. Usually, the owners get their ships and contents back but must pay large ransoms, she said. That also boosts the price of chocolate.

"Droughts and pirates are making my life miserable right now," the Logan County businesswoman said.

On May 13, the price in-

creases slammed Wertheim when she needed to buy chocolate for a large order for May 16.

"I normally pay \$329 to order 100 pounds and it was \$727 or close to \$800 with shipping," she said.

"I didn't have a choice," she said of buying the ingredients but added that she did get a discount from the supplier, which has served the family well for 75 years. She was able to buy the chocolate and complete the big order for her customer who agreed to a higher price up front.

"We really try to hold the line," Wertheim said.

She still uses 1908 recipes and makes everything from scratch with minimal ingredients and no preservatives, which customers tell her they are willing to pay for because they like the flavor.

Wertheim said the past few months with rising prices have been "very upsetting." She hadn't felt this way since 2017 when her father died and the business fell on her shoulders. "I've been around the business since I was 18 months old," she said of the responsibility she feels for the "family legacy."

RGW Candy Company will temporarily have minimal chocolate at the store, but she will be back in full

force in September for caramel apple season.

While the chocolate takes a backburner, she will concentrate on her herb and spice farm and Wertheim's Gardens, which are the most profitable part of her operation now. For years, chocolate was the moneymaker with her farm business supplementing it.

She uses her garden-grown ingredients to make dishes including baked spaghetti, enchiladas and homemade pasta sauces, which she sells through Market Wagon to be delivered to homes in central Illinois and the St. Louis area.

Wertheim said being a Harvest Host is also a profit-adder. Through the program, RVers stay at the farms, vineyards and other businesses, and in return they shop at their businesses.

For another central Illinois chocolate store, the timing is right for their annual summer shutdown. "We are unique in that we close for the summer," said Zach Meyer owner of Minonk Chocolate Company.

Summer closings have been a tradition since his family took over the business. The original chocolate business started in Minonk in 1915; Meyer's mother and aunt ran it from 1995 to 2021.

The Minonk shop will reopen the Tuesday after Labor Day, said Meyer, who expects prices will remain high.

"We will take it as it comes," he said.

(This story was distributed through a cooperative project between Illinois Farm Bureau and the Illinois Press Association. For more food and farming news, visit FarmWeekNow.com.)



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Collaboration key to moving the needle on conservation

By **EVAN HULTINE**
Illinois Farm Bureau
Vice President

Environmental challenges have always driven innovation and advancement in agriculture.

From extreme drought leading to enhanced seed genetics and flooding resulting in prescriptive fertilizer applications, farmers have pivoted their practices and adapted their operations to continue producing food, fiber and fuel.

We face another driving force with nutrient runoff and the hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico, and producers have responded by deploying a range of conservation practices across their farms.

Practices like no-till, strip-till, cover cropping, buffer strips, wood chip bioreactors and others are all playing a significant role in keeping nitrogen and phosphorus in the soil and out of our freshwater supplies.

Environmentally-sound practices like these are the foundation of Illinois farmers' continued commitment to implement long-term solutions that protect our nation's water supply and improve soil health.

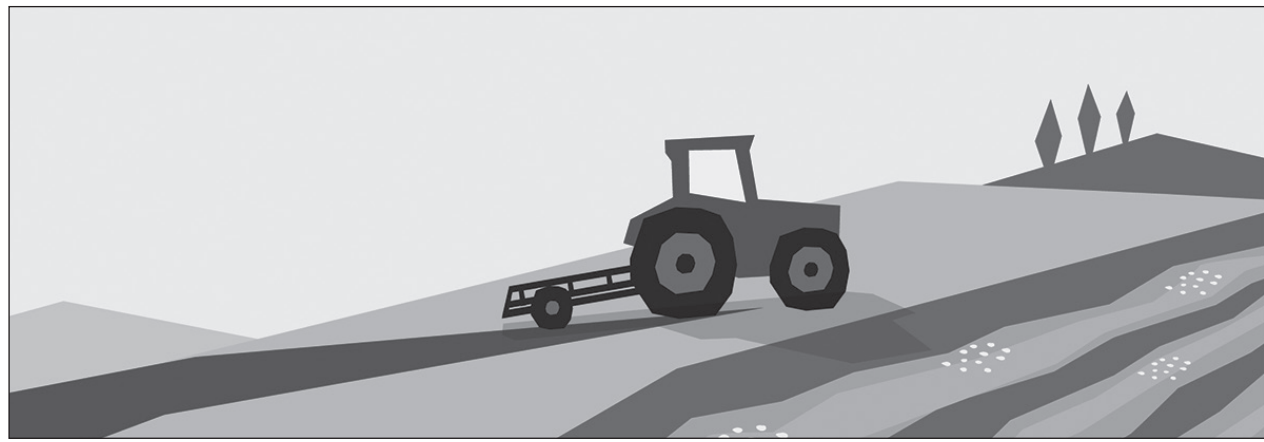
Illinois Farm Bureau has supported that commitment by distributing more

than \$1.17 million for 150 conservation projects in 75 counties through its Nutrient Stewardship Grant Program, which began in 2015.

In fact, farmer conservation efforts in Illinois have led to measurable progress in reducing total nitrate loss and shrinking the size of the Gulf of Mexico's hypoxic zone.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Hypoxia Task Force reported last December that Illinois was one of 12 states to meet interim nitrogen goals for 2025 by reducing total nitrogen loss by 20%. The 2023 Illinois Ag Retail Survey also found that in 2022, across 917 Illinois fields, 24% of corn and 44% of soybeans were no-till. Cover crops were found on approximately 9% of fields in fall 2021, and while 49% of respondents reported fall application of anhydrous, 97% of the producers reported use of an inhibitor to reduce the potential for leeching.

These indicators suggest significant progress toward meeting the goals outlined in the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy. While the conservation efforts of individual farmers are important, we cannot overlook the val-



ue of moving the needle through a collaborative approach.

A leader in this space has been Ohio Farm Bureau, which partnered with the state's environmental community and government agencies in 2019 to launch H2Ohio, a statewide initiative aimed at improving the water quality of Lake Erie and the surrounding Western Lake Erie Basin by reducing nitrogen and phosphorus loads.

Backed by \$270 million in state money, and with the support of groups like the Ohio Environmental Council, one element of the H2Ohio program is a mix of financial incentives for farmers in the basin to deploy conservation practices that align with specific field conditions.

For each on-farm prac-

tice, like planting cover crops and developing a nutrient management plan, farmers can earn a per-acre payment that stack together on the same acre. Specific practices, such as strip tilling or applying manure in lieu of chemical fertilizer, can also result in higher payments.

The flexibility within H2Ohio for Ohio farmers to use a menu of voluntary conservation practices tailored to their farms led to 2,400 producers enrolling 1.4 million acres in voluntary nutrient management plans in fiscal year 2023, representing about 35% of the basin.

Altogether, those efforts have resulted in reducing phosphorus loads in Lake Erie by 232,000 pounds in 2022, and by more than 315,000 pounds in 2023.

The willingness and

understanding of all parties in Ohio to take ownership and investment in the responsibility and value of clean water and healthy soil leaves some of us green with envy — and not just

producers. A similar opportunity for this kind of collaboration exists in Illinois, where producers have demonstrated their serious commitment to conservation practices and made meaningful investments to protect the environment. The state-level \$5-per-acre crop insurance discount for planting cover crops

has proven an effective first step. Illinois farmers across the program's five years have enrolled nearly half-a-million total cover-cropped acres and annually exceed the program's acreage cap.

Imagine the progress we could make if armed with additional state conservation incentives.

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Tar spot is a big deal some years, but isn't an annual problem, so researchers aren't putting all their eggs in one basket.

Ten years of tar spot: Bayer makes breakthrough in research

By **RHIANNON BRANCH**
FarmWeek

Tar spot was first discovered in the U.S. in 2015, making this the 10th season farmers and researchers have battled the corn disease.

In the beginning, there were a lot of unknowns, Jim Donnelly, technical agronomist with DEKALB/Asgrow based in Lee County, told the RFD Radio Network

“One thing that that we’ve learned and researched is that fungicides work. They work very well and especially some of the newer fungicides with multiple modes of action,” Donnelly said.

Fast forward to today, Bayer researchers can artificially inoculate tar spot in

field test plots, which will advance research in both crop protection and genetic tolerance.

“We need the disease in our trials so that we know which ones are good and which ones are bad and to date it’s been hard to get that consistent disease level,” he said.

“With this we can consistently deliver it where we want it and that essentially speeds up our ability to characterize and deliver new products to the market.”

He said while there is good potential for genetic tolerance, farmers are still reliant on fungicides.

“If we find ourselves in very heavy pressure, there really isn’t the level of resistance out there that we need that allows us to not have to spray.”

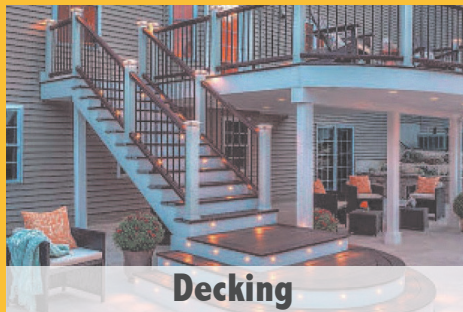
But this development is a step in the right direction.

“I think that it will allow us to select products that are close to commercial availability and allow us to prioritize those,” he said. “Then, ultimately, the long-term benefit is developing products earlier on in the pipeline, picking out that parent germplasm that’s really strong and being able to work with that all the way through our pipeline so that we have even better tolerance several years out.”

He said genetic tools for tar spot management are in the works. “Some of them are a lot closer than others, but there are genetic tools and better products with better tolerance that will be coming soon to the market and some very soon,” he said.

Tar spot is a big deal some years, but isn’t an annual problem, he said, so researchers aren’t putting all their eggs in one basket.

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Watch for signs of heat stress in livestock

By RHIANNON BRANCH
FarmWeek

With plenty of warm weather left to go, livestock producers are reminded to monitor animals and implement management practices to reduce the risk of heat stress.

“We’ve had a couple spells of some high heat and high humidity, and it doesn’t take very many of those days to cause some stress on the livestock,” Dan Shike, interim head of the Department of Animal Sciences at the University of Illinois, told FarmWeek.

Heat stress is more common during periods of high nighttime temperatures.

“When we’re not getting the nighttime cooling, that’s when those animals really start to have some challenges because they’re not able to get rid of that excess heat load and dissipate that heat through the night,” Shike said.

Common signs of heat stress are panting, increased water intake and decreased feed intake. Low milk production in dairy cows could also be a symptom.

Shike said ensuring access to plenty of fresh water is key, for cattle especially.

“That’s one of their primary ways of dealing with the excess heat load and their water consumption will go up dramatically during times of heat stress,” he said. Providing enough shade

for livestock in pastures is also helpful if it does not restrict airflow.

“If we’re talking about putting out shade structures, we need to think about do we have the right amount?” he said. “If there’s not enough space, the animals will crowd, then that’s actually counterproductive because when they’re all right next to each other, they’re not going to be able to dissipate as much heat.”

For livestock housed in buildings, like many swine and dairy farms, Shike said exposure to direct sunlight isn’t a concern, but ventilation is important.

“Air flow ventilation, fans, misters and sprinklers are all tools that are used.”

With county fair and exhibition season in full swing, Shike said there are extra things for showmen to consider.

“Be mindful of when you transport those animals and try to transport them in the early morning or evening

hours to avoid the high heat as some of those trailers can get pretty hot.”

He said exhibitors can keep livestock cool at fairs by using fans and misters, offering fresh water and taking frequent trips to the wash rack.

“You do have to be careful if you have an animal that’s absolutely in heat stress because if you put a bunch of cold water on their back you can shock their system,” he said. “So, the best thing is to give them a drink, maybe start with a little water on their legs and belly and gradually cool them down.”

If an exhibition animal gets overheated in the staging area or show ring, a rag with cool water around their neck can provide some relief, Shike said.

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URBANA – Identifying on-farm needs to increase efficiency, safety, practicality, and overall profitability is where ideas for adapting technology begin. From there, advancing technology for productivity and sustainability seems to be more within reach in a changing agricultural landscape.

The I-FARM University Learning Series webinars help farmers, researchers, industry professionals, and anyone in agriculture explore today’s agricultural technologies for large-scale operations to adaptations for small hobby farms.

The series runs monthly on upcoming dates, including:

- Sept. 12: Farm Robotics
- Oct. 10: Economics of Adopting Weeding Robots
- Nov. 14: Smart Grazing with Livestock Management
- Dec. 12: Technology Adoption for Small Farms

Topics featured throughout the series sessions include communication between farm equipment, sensors and management systems, satellites, robotics for crops and livestock management, and economics around adopting technology in farming operations.

Experts from their respective fields lead each session, provide economic insights, and share practical knowledge relevant to today’s farming operations. Sessions will begin at 11 a.m. on the second Thursday of the month through December. Learn more about the series and register at go.illinois.edu/IFARM2024.

I-FARM, or Illinois Farming and Regenerative Management, is a collaboration grant-funded 80-acre agricultural testbed where commodity crops, cover crops, and livestock are farmed using synergistic and sustainable practices.

The free series is co-sponsored by the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Center for Digital Agriculture, Agricultural Safety & Health Program, National Center for Supercomputing Applications, Institute for Sustainability, Energy, and Environment, College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, farmdoc, and University of Illinois Extension.

If you need a reasonable accommodation to participate in this program, contact Jim Baltz at jhbaltz@illinois.edu or by phone at 217-333-8276. Early requests are strongly encouraged to allow sufficient time to meet access needs.

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L. Akers named to appraisers Hall of Fame

Lowell Akers, AFM, ARA, Retired, has been named to the membership Hall of Fame by the Illinois Society of Professional Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers. A plaque marking the fete was presented to him by Russ Hiatt, AFM, ARA, Hiatt Farmland Services, Champaign, immediate-past president of the Society.

“This is an especially proud day for me because I have known Lowell for many, many years,” Hiatt said. “And it’s a unique honor to give to Lowell because he’s never been actively involved as an officer, or a leading committee chair. But he’s always been here as a mentor for dozens of us and as a member who has consistently attended Chapter meetings and events for decades, literally. And as an appraiser, he has been a professional of the standards. He is the level we all aspire to.”

“This is a great honor,” Akers stated, when presented the award. “I’ve had a wonderful career working in Illinois, have met and worked with so many great friends and hundreds of clients over the years.”

Akers, now 95, joined the Illinois Chapter and the American Society of Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers in 1967. That started



Lowell Akers, left, accepts a plaque from Russ Hiatt for Akers' selection to the Hall of Fame by the Illinois Society of Professional Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers.

a career path that found him employed by a number of companies including banks and farm management firms. He retired in 2023 as a member of the Akers Group based in Neillsville, Wis.

“I’m especially proud that my two boys, Mark, (Neillsville, Wis.) and Greg (DeKalb) have kinda fol-

lowed in my footsteps and are active in the industry, today. And I have two grandchildren who are looking to go into the business as well,” he said.

The Hall of Farm is the highest citation the Chapter bestows on its members. It is typically awarded at the organization’s annual

meeting, but Akers, who now lives with his son Mark in Wisconsin, was unable to attend the ISPF-MA meeting. Greg spoke on his behalf at that event. Members of the Chapter’s leadership team made the trek to Neillsville and physically presented the plaque marking the citation.

New program in Illinois compares farming practices and outcomes

By KEVIN BESSLER
The Center Square

SPRINGFIELD – A farming program in Illinois aims to improve farm incomes and environmental outcomes.

Precision Conservation Management recently released a summary of nine years’ worth of in-field data from Illinois farms. Farmers enrolled in PCM receive annual data analysis for their farm in addition to access to conservation experts and guidance on cost-share programs available to farmers. Through their data analysis, the program aims to identify conservation practices that effectively address environmental issues without risking the farmers’ bottom line.

“It definitely sheds light on what a person is doing and if someone else is doing it the data set can give you a glimpse into a different practice that maybe you aren’t doing that you want to do,” said Zach Wells, a farmer in Champaign County.

According to PCM data, the most frequently observed tillage systems on the most profitable acres were one-pass light tillage for corn and no-till for soybeans.

PCM surveyed enrolled farmers in 2024 and found that 64% of farmers who don’t already use reduced tillage practices agree that they are likely to reduce or eliminate tillage due to information they have received from PCM.

Reducing tillage can also have a significant impact on soil erosion and water quality. PCM began as a response to the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy in 2015, which guides state efforts to improve water quality at home and downstream by reducing nitrogen and phosphorus levels in lakes, streams and rivers.

“Between now and 2025, we all have to do something different on each acre to achieve the goals of the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy,” said Dirk Rice, a Champaign County farmer. “We can’t do what we’ve always done and avoid negative publicity or difficult regulations like we see in surrounding states.”

Farmers in Kentucky and Nebraska are also taking part in the program.

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